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ESSEX COUNTY NEWS RELEASE

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Treffinger, James Recommend New Plan for Sportsplex; Stadium to Move to Downtown Site

Essex County Executive James W. Treffinger and Newark Mayor Sharpe James have announced that they will recommend that the proposed Sportsplex project be relocated from the City's Ironbound section to a downtown site just north of the new New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Under their proposal the prior site, a county park with heavily contaminated soil, would be cleaned up and returned to community recreation use, provided efforts to have it designated as a historic site can be thwarted. Plans for a new park in the Ironbound, which would have replaced the contaminated site, will be scrapped in the new approach.

In making the announcement, the two leaders pointed to the morass of state and Federal regulations affecting the project as the cause for the shift. The project has been the subject of numerous regulatory reviews regarding environmental conditions, state and Federal park funding rules and its alleged historic status. "While we feel that the project would ultimately receive all the approvals necessary, the delays which may be involved could cause us to miss a golden opportunity to spur Newark's continued revitalization", Treffinger indicated.

The new site proposed is at the northern end of the business district, within two blocks of the Erie-Lackawanna train station and close by entrances and exits to Interstate Route 280. The stadium, which is expected to be a multi-purpose facility capable of hosting baseball, football, soccer and special events, would be on the east side of Broad Street, near the corner of Bridge St. "This location will give the ballpark great access to all forms of transportation, and allows us to take advantage of existing parking facilities as well", James noted.

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While the shift in location will allow the stadium to move forward, the fate of the former site, Riverbank Park, is less certain. Opponents of the stadium plan have sought to have the park designated as a historic site, an action that the two officials say will hurt, rather than help the park's future. "If the park is so designated, which is not warranted by its history or its condition, it will be economically impractical to remediate the toxic soil conditions which exist", Treffinger said. The park has been officially closed since October of 1996 due to the discovery of high levels of heavy metals like lead, arsenic and cadmium throughout the site.

If the historic status issue can be resolved, the new plan would call for the park to be rebuilt, starting with complete remediation of the soil conditions. Under that scenario, the park could be reconfigured to meet current recreational demands, with community input to help determine the priorities for the new facility. With the new Riverbank Park expected to serve neighborhood recreation needs in the area, the plan for a new park along the Passaic River waterfront would be dropped.

Henry Martinez, who represents the area on both the City Council and the County Board of Freeholders, supported the changes. "While I believe the original plan would have done wonderful things for the Ironbound, the potential delays could have left our community in limbo indefinitely" he said. "With this new approach, the city and the county will still reap the benefits of the Sportsplex, and Ironbound citizens will hopefully get a clean and modern recreational facility" he added. Martinez joined the other officials in stressing that it was imperative that the historic designation not be made, saying "That would only serve to perpetuate the present problems of contamination and obsolescence".

Treffinger and James indicated that they will ask for quick action on the new plan and said they will meet with local legislators shortly to outline the full scope of their recommendations. If approved, the new stadium would be expected to open in the spring of 1999. The schedule for work on Riverbank Park's restoration will depend on the regulatory response to the plan, but the two leaders indicated that clean-up work could start within 60 days after the approvals are obtained.

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